

SME-QA Hiring Pilot: Lessons Learned

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Executive Summary

In spring 2019, the U.S. Digital Service (USDS) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) partnered to test Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments (SME-QA), a process where SMEs work with human resources (HR) specialists to create qualification criteria based on the SMEs' determination of what is required to be successful. The SMEs then use these criteria to conduct resume review and phone interview assessments.

The USDS Hiring Pilot Team hypothesized that if SMEs completed these assessments before HR specialists considered an applicant qualified and eligible for veterans' preference, fewer unqualified applicants would make it through the process, causing hiring managers to receive higher quality certificates and make more selections.

USDS and OPM ran hiring pilots at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Interior (DOI). The SME-QA pilots showed that agencies can drastically improve hiring outcomes using current delegated examining rules and regulations

This case study describes how participating agencies were selected, the success criteria of the pilots, and lessons learned by the USDS Hiring Pilot Team for each phase of the pilots.

Selecting Agency Participants for the First Pilots

USDS and OPM sought agencies for the pilot that had received delegated examination hiring certificates with no qualified candidates, despite knowing that qualified applicants had applied for the positions. In addition, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team required agencies to meet these additional criteria:

- **Have a minimum of five vacancies for the same role:** The pilot SME-QA process required six to eight SMEs (subject matter experts) to contribute up to 50 hours each over two to three months. Multiple open positions justified this high engagement level and enabled the agency to select more applicants.
- **Use Public Delegated Examination:** Although agencies using direct hire authorities and merit promotion stand to benefit from aspects of the SME-QA process, the pilot sought to test its process within the title 5 competitive service laws and regulations, including the full application of veterans' preference.
- **GS-12 or higher:** The higher grade level meant not only that the specialized experience required would be an efficient use of SMEs' time to assess technical qualifications, but also that education could not be considered a valid substitute for experience.

The first two agencies to meet all these criteria at the time USDS initiated the pilot were the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Interior (DOI), National Park Service. Specifically, the team worked with:

- The offices of the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) and Chief Information Officer (CIO) at HHS to fill up to 10 GS-13 2210 Information Technology (IT) Specialist vacancies across four parentheses (or sub-roles) in one location.
- The National Park Service at DOI to fill up to seven GS-13 2210 System Administrator vacancies across three locations.

Use of the same job series at both agencies was a coincidence, as this process works for any position with specialized experience where SMEs want to help evaluate qualifications.

Guiding Success Criteria and Results of the SME-QA Process

The USDS Hiring Pilot Team guided their work using three primary criteria for the pilots.

- **Applicant Funnel:** HR specialists successfully work with SMEs to narrow down the number of applicants during the assessment phases before any applicant was determined qualified.
- **Certificate Quality:** Hiring managers make multiple selections from the certificates to fill their initial stated vacancies.
- **Assessment Before Qualification:** HR specialists apply veterans' preference only after applicants passed all SME assessments.

Summary of Pilot Results

The USDS Hiring Pilot Team met all stated objectives from the guiding success criteria. This chart illustrates the successful funnel of applicants through each qualification determination phase.

	Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)	Department of the Interior (DOI)
Original Applicants	164	224
Qualified for Interview 1 (based on resume)	103	78
Qualified for Interview 2	54	38
Found Qualified	36	25
Selections	7	13

In the HHS pilot, SMEs found 22% of applicants qualified, and made seven selections. By contrast, in the five most recent GS-13 and GS-14 2210 hiring actions at HHS, HR specialists found an average of 51% of applicants to be qualified and hiring managers made an average of three selections from the resulting certificates.

In the DOI pilot, SMEs found 11% of applicants qualified, and made 13 selections. By contrast, in the most recent similar hiring action at DOI, HR specialists found 95% of applicants to be qualified and hiring managers made no selections from the resulting certificate.

At both agencies, HR specialists only adjudicated veterans' preference once SMEs had completed their interview assessments. At HHS, four out of 36 qualified applicants were veterans. At DOI, five out of 25 qualified applicants were veterans.

While the initial pilots focused on quality over speed, the team found ways to decrease time to hire by iterating between the two pilots. The process at HHS took three and a half months between posting the job announcement and creating the certificate, while the process at DOI took only two and a half months. The primary improvement to DOI's time to hire was due to concurrent interviews, where an applicant who passed the first interview was immediately scheduled for the second.



Lessons Learned from Each Stage of the Pilots

The USDS Hiring Pilot Team took away lessons throughout both pilots, all of which should inform how agencies hire using the SME-QA process moving forward.

Managing the Hiring Action

When designing the SME-QA hiring process, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team originally intended HR specialists to:

- Assist SMEs in defining the assessment criteria during the job analysis workshop
- Create and post the job announcement based on the results of the workshop
- Train SMEs to review resumes and conduct interview assessments
- Review SMEs' technical determination justifications to ensure that they included documentation of a specific competency/proficiency that was not met for any applicant found unqualified
- When necessary, support SME expertise by returning feedback to them for more complete documentation of decisions. However, to reduce burden on participating SMEs, between one and three sentences were required per justification statement.

- Adjudicate preference for veterans after SMEs determine which applicants pass interview assessments
- Apply category rankings based on interview results and issue the certificates

Given HR specialists' broad responsibilities across multiple, concurrent hiring actions, as well as the overall unfamiliarity with the SME-QA process, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team found themselves contributing more than originally anticipated to ensure the success of the pilots. Tasks included:

- Maintaining relationships with various stakeholders with expertise in necessary policy
- Managing the overall timeline to avoid delays
- Gathering baseline data about previous conventional hiring actions at both agencies to measure against the SME-QA process
- Designing and facilitating both the job analysis workshop and the resume review and interview trainings
- Working with SMEs after the job analysis workshop to finish defining the required competencies and testing the assessment interview questions
- Recruiting desirable applicants outside of USAJOBS
- Training HR specialists to review SMEs' documented resume review and interview feedback to ensure sufficient justification without questioning the SMEs' judgement
- Coordinating time-intensive, manual interview scheduling efforts with staff who did not typically complete such tasks
- Advocating for the applicant experience during all phases of a hiring action, including removing barriers to entry in Government, ensuring the job announcement was accurate and used plain language, and maintaining a reasonable timeline

Lessons Learned About Managing Hiring Actions

1. **A dedicated project manager outside HR is key for managing the SME-QA process.** A project manager is professionally trained to manage and maintain complex schedules and stakeholders, and would be a valuable addition to the HR staff responsible for hiring actions. This person can also ensure that agencies do not fall back on practices that do not fall within the outlined SME-QA process.
2. **Supportive tooling will reduce the time burden of the SME-QA process.** Supporting the SME-QA process took more time from HR specialists than expected, and these specialists must be given the time and bandwidth to

participate fully. HR specialists contributed an average of 118 hours¹ over a three-month time period to each pilot hiring action, with the most time-intensive work involving review of the SMEs' resume, interview documentation, and scores and learning and troubleshooting the new SME-QA process. SME-specific review tools would reduce both the risk of human error and the time HR specialists need to track assessments throughout the process.

3. **Compliance with established timelines for each phase of a hiring action helps with timeliness.** Agencies must apply urgency to completing the different tasks outlined in each phase of the hiring action. By establishing pre-determined agreements with all participants that outline how long a task will take, highly skilled applicants will be less likely to fall out of the process due to competing job offers, and agencies will fill their critical roles with those desirable candidates.

Selecting Subject Matter Experts

Selecting SMEs whom hiring managers trust is critical for the SME-QA process. Participating SMEs are tasked with defining required competencies and proficiencies, writing assessments that test applicants' qualifications, and determining whether applicants are qualified based on the required competencies. The team encouraged agencies to select their best-in-class SMEs to participate.

The eight SMEs assigned at each agency were GS-13 to GS-15 staff who were currently or recently either serving in the role being filled or managing individuals serving in that role. None were selecting officials for the delegated examination certificate that would be issued for the pilot hiring action. To have sufficient SMEs to participate in the pilot, both agencies pulled SMEs from multiple offices throughout the agency, some of whom came from offices that did not have vacancies to fill.

Lessons Learned About Selecting Subject Matter Experts

1. **Agencies should select SMEs who excel in their position.** Agencies should make a concerted effort to make their best SMEs available, with ample bandwidth to participate in their hiring process. While the temporary redeployment of these crucial organizational resources may be painful in the short-term, agencies will hire professionals who create significant long-term value.
2. **Agencies should seek 10 qualified SMEs to participate throughout various phases of a hiring action.** When an announcement is set to close at midnight on

¹ Source: USDS interviews of participating HR specialists during the pilot timeframe

the day when 100 applications are received, it is very likely the applicant count will exceed 100. Because by law agencies may not arbitrarily limit the number of applicants who will receive interviews, agencies should be prepared to conduct interviews with as many applicants who pass the resume review phase as necessary. To manage the potential high volume through every phase without overwhelming the SMEs, agencies using the SME-QA process should choose 10 SMEs to participate.

3. **Carefully calibrate participating SMEs from multiple offices.** Both agencies gathered SMEs from multiple offices and ran into issues when an applicant with ties to one office was disqualified by an SME from another office. Rather than assume that its best not to share SMEs between offices for a hiring action, agencies should use the same criteria to select SMEs and then work diligently to calibrate their decisions. Hiring managers also should know that even recruited applicants may, at times, perform poorly in assessments and would not be found qualified.

Conducting Job Analysis

“The most important thing we learned was how critical it was to have the SMEs set the assessment criteria used in the job announcement at the beginning of the process” - Agency Pilot Selecting Official

The job analysis workshop bridges a standard position description into accurate qualification criteria and structured interview assessments. The USDS Hiring Pilot Team originally estimated that SMEs and HR specialists would need 16 total hours to conduct a comprehensive job analysis exercise, including:

- Introducing SMEs to the process and the importance of their role within it
- Identifying and categorizing the tasks that SMEs complete on a regular basis for the posted role
- Naming and then defining the required competencies and proficiencies for the posted position based on the job task analysis
- Writing two sets of structured interview questions that assess the applicants' breadth and depth of knowledge with the required competencies and proficiency levels
- Deciding on assessment strategy details, including the number of work history pages an SME will review in a resume, how recently the applicant demonstrates knowledge of modern technical skills, and whether there should be additional assessments, such as a portfolio of design work

- Testing the defined competencies and proficiencies by reviewing them against resumes pulled from OPM's Agency Talent Portal (<https://agencyportal.usajobs.gov/>) for similar positions

Over a two-day period, HHS allotted nine hours for this workshop, and DOI allotted 12 hours. Agency stakeholders initially identified a single generalist position description with common competencies. However, because SMEs

“ *The most important thing we learned was how critical it was to have the SMEs set the assessment criteria used in the job announcement at the beginning of the process.*

- Agency Pilot Selecting Official

participating in the job analysis workshop represented multiple offices, they would be filling specific roles in addition to the generalist role. Given the limited time and the added complexity of the additional roles, each agency encountered trouble completing all prescribed activities during the allotted time.

- **SMEs at HHS** were able to define core competencies and interview questions for the generalist role within the nine hours allotted, but did not complete defining role-specific competencies nor interview questions for the specific roles. USDS Hiring Pilot team members spent three weeks following up with SMEs on email and over the phone on an ad hoc basis after the workshop to complete the unfinished work.
- **SMEs at DOI** were able to define all prescribed tasks during their allotted 12 hours. After the workshop, SMEs expressed regret that they didn't have the time to test and iterate on the interview questions given the weight these assessments had on determining an applicant's qualifications.

Lessons Learned About Conducting Job Analysis

1. **The job analysis workshop required a full 16-20 hours.** Based on research with SMEs who participated, the job analysis workshops at both agencies felt rushed. In addition, requiring separate role-specific competencies and interview questions added significantly to the workshop. SMEs at both agencies said the process would have been much better had they spent additional time refining the interview questions and preparing additional role-specific assessment questions for the second interview.
2. **All SMEs who participate in the SME-QA process should attend job analysis.** SMEs who conducted resume review and interview assessments had a much easier time understanding the required competencies and proficiencies when they had participated in the job analysis workshop.

2210 IT SPECIALIST REQUIRED COMPETENCIES

During the job analysis workshop, SMEs worked with HR to establish the specialized experience required for the position, which were presented as competencies and proficiency levels. In practices, these competencies became the minimum qualification bar for the position.

OPM Qualification Standards	HHS Job Analysis	DOI Job Analysis
Attention to Detail	IT Practices	Technical Operations
Oral Communication	Technical Communication	Security & Policy
Problem Solving	Analytical Ability	Communication & Collaboration
Customer Service	Stakeholder Engagement	Customer Service & Support
	Managing Without Authority	

Using the SME-QA Process to Fill Multiple Roles

Though all applicants were applying to the same general role with the same core competencies, SMEs stated that without additional role-specific competencies, they would not be able to properly assess the applicants. Applicants were asked to select up to two of the four specific roles they were interested in while they completed their application. Managing this complexity was onerous on HR specialists, SMEs, and interview schedulers, not to mention the USDS Hiring Pilot Team.

- SMEs created role-specific assessment questions and expected responses to test applicants' knowledge of the roles, either during the job analysis workshops or afterward.
- Given limitations in the application workflow, HR specialists manually determined which roles each applicant should be considered for when creating applicant lists for SME resume reviews.
- SMEs had to keep track of core and role-specific competencies during resume reviews and interview assessments. In addition, they made themselves available for the second assessment interview, which gauged the applicants' depth of knowledge in the required competencies that pertained to the specific roles.
- Interview schedulers manually tracked which applicants were being assessed for which roles, coordinated schedules between the applicants and SMEs who represented those roles, and specified the roles to applicants and SMEs when setting up the interviews.

- Through all assessment phases, HR specialists reviewed all interview feedback from SMEs to ensure that no role-specific assessment feedback had been missed or applied incorrectly.

Lessons Learned About Advertising Multiple Roles in the Same Announcement

Create separate job announcements for positions that can't be assessed using only the core competencies. Ideally agencies will work together to find the truly shared core competencies required for the position. If SMEs determine that identifying competencies for a separate role is necessary, that role should be recruited and posted in a separate job announcement. Listing multiple roles within one job announcement likely made those roles harder for qualified applicants to find.

Creating the Job Announcement

The USDS Hiring Pilot Team created an alternative job announcement template using plain language, styled to mimic private sector announcements. Applicants saw these key elements:

- **The "Responsibilities" section** documented the job duties that SMEs defined during the job analysis workshop, rather than the content of the position description (PD).
- **The "Qualifications" section** documented the technical competencies that SMEs identified as required during job analysis.
- **The "How You'll Be Assessed" section** clearly stated that SMEs would only review the first two or three pages of the applicant's resume to determine whether it reflected the required qualifications.
- **The "Overview" section** specified that the job announcement would close at midnight the day that they received 100 applications.



HHS received 164 applications for their posted position. DOI received 224 applications. While job announcements should ideally be open for a two-week period, both announcements closed within two days of opening due to applicant volume.

The job announcements for the two pilot agencies are available online:

- **DOI:** <https://www.usajobs.gov/GetJob/ViewDetails/532244000>
- **HHS:** <https://www.usajobs.gov/GetJob/ViewDetails/529652500>

Lessons Learned About Creating the Job Announcement

Create accurate and thoughtful job announcements that keep the applicant in mind. Many agencies paste the text of the PD in the announcement as a means of describing the position. With intentional care toward plain language guidelines and directly addressing applicants' needs, agencies will target highly qualified applicants to their key positions.

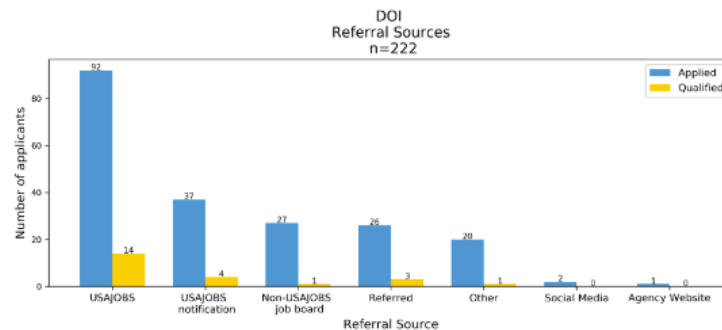
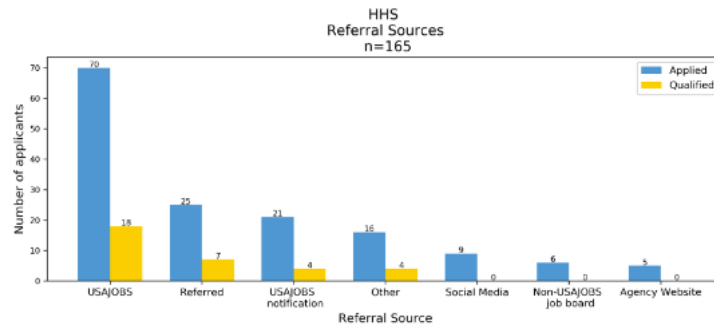
Recruiting Applicants

Agencies receive high applicant volume from their job announcements, and may consider it unnecessary to recruit additional applicants. Neither pilot agency had a

recruiter on staff and limited their recruitment efforts to a mass email announcing the positions to internal employees.

In an attempt to attract new applicants, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team attempted to recruit highly qualified applicants using these limited recruitment tactics:

- USDS Administrator Matt Cutts announced the postings to his followers on Twitter. At that point in time, his Twitter follower count was made up of approximately 500,000 technologists.
- The team posted the DOI position to discussion boards, including Hacker News (<https://news.ycombinator.com/>), Code for America (<https://codeforamerica.org/>), and OpenGov Jobs (<https://www.opengovjobs.org/>).



Lessons Learned About Recruiting Applicants

1. **Despite a high number of applicants on USAJOBS, agencies must cultivate a diverse talent pipeline that includes private-sector candidates who may not typically search USAJOBS for Government positions.** With limited outside recruitment, of the 25 minimally qualified applicants at DOI, only one was rated in the "Best Qualified" category. At HHS, 15 out of 36 qualified applicants were in the "Best Qualified" category.
2. **Agencies must leverage their pipelines to announce positions ahead of when they're posted.** Applicants need time to consider a position and prepare

to apply. When positions are posted only for one to two days, applicants should be aware of the position to make use of their brief window to apply for the position with their required documents.

Reviewing Resumes

Before SMEs reviewed resumes, they were required to attend a two-hour training facilitated by the USDS Hiring Pilot Team. SMEs at HHS found the original guidance to write a brief statement describing why the applicant did or did not meet the required qualifications confusing. The team also originally prescribed a nuanced "borderline" rating that SMEs could apply to resumes when they were unsure whether an applicant truly met a required proficiency. Finally, 27% of resume reviews required tie breaking decisions by a third SME at HHS, indicating that SMEs had applied required proficiencies inconsistently.

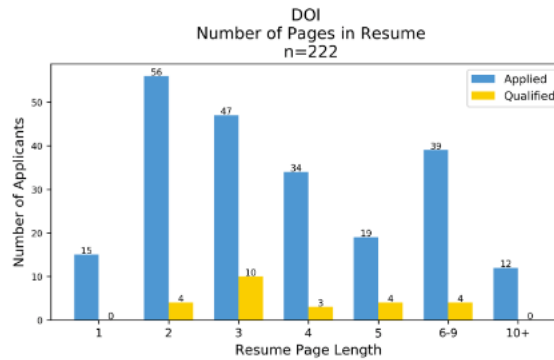
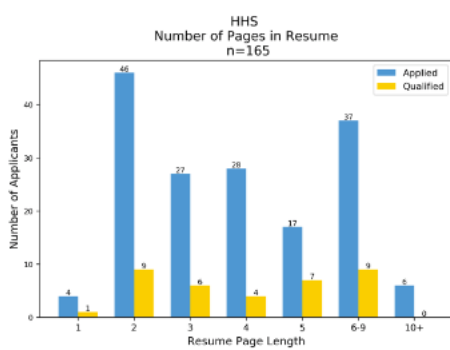
Based on lessons learned during the resume review phase at HHS, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team extended the DOI training from two to three hours, allowing additional time for SMEs to practice reviewing resumes and more closely calibrate decisions with one another. By adding an extra hour for training and eliminating the "borderline" resume review rating option, only 20% of DOI resume reviews required a tie breaking decision. The team also developed a checklist of requirements for considering an applicant qualified, which reduced the number of reviews that HR specialists sent back to SMEs for clarification.

SMEs encountered several issues when using USA Staffing to manage the resume review process, as USA Staffing is not currently designed for SMEs to perform assessments. They complained about being logged out of USA Staffing after 15 minutes of inactivity, which made them lose not only their place in their list of applicants to review, but also their unsaved data. Some SMEs resorted to downloading their assigned resumes, reviewing them offline, and later documenting their notes in one session. Finally, SMEs who conducted tie-breaking decisions were not provided their list of applicants immediately, which added one to two weeks to the resume review phase.

Lessons Learned About Reviewing Resumes

1. **USA Staffing should amend the practice of automatically logging out users after 15 minutes of inactivity.** Many Government applications require this conservative practice based on their interpretation of NIST Special Publication 800-63B authentication guidelines. By extending the time out to at least four hours, users can take meetings, answer phone calls, and complete other normal activities over the course of a work day without losing their work.

2. **SMEs need a checklist of the required qualifications they must check for in a resume.** The SMEs were trained to write a one to three sentence justification per resume, but HR could not validate easily whether SMEs had reviewed resumes for all the requirements. The USDS Hiring Pilot Team has prototyped a tool in which HR specialists populate the list of requirements and SMEs simply select whether the requirement was met for each one. When an applicant does not meet a technical requirement, the tool prompts the SME to provide a brief explanation, and the SME moves on to assess the next applicant.
3. **Two to three pages of work experience were sufficient for determining qualifications.** During their job analysis workshops, SMEs and HR specialists at both agencies limited the number of resume pages the SMEs would review and documented this limit clearly in the job announcement. In interviews with SMEs after they finished reviewing resumes, SMEs said the limit did not hamper their ability to complete their qualification review. Similarly, applicants who submitted longer resumes were not disqualified at a higher rate than applicants with shorter resumes.



Scheduling Interviews with Applicants

Because HR specialists do not schedule interviews when managing conventional hiring actions, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team identified a cloud-based scheduling tool to automate scheduling before the pilots began. However, these tools have not yet been approved widely for Government use. Instead, HHS asked HR liaisons, and DOI asked the hiring managers' administrative staff to schedule interviews for applicants and SMEs.

The USDS Hiring Pilot Team prescribed guidelines to schedulers at both agencies. To prevent fatigue and allow SMEs to manage their normal day-to-day work, they were not to be scheduled for more than three interviews a day. In addition, to allow them time to complete their post-interview assessments when the interview was fresh in their mind, SMEs were not to be scheduled for back-to-back interviews. However, in many cases, schedulers were forced to forego the guidelines. Some SMEs were unavailable for long periods within the three-week interview phase, and requested to do extra interviews during the days they were available. Additionally, HHS specified in their assessment strategy that a member of the HR team would join every phone interview, which added 145 hours of time for HR and created extra complexity for schedulers.

Interviews at HHS were scheduled in clearly delineated phases, with all first interviews completed before any second interviews were scheduled. At DOI, if an applicant passed the first phone interview, schedulers would reach out to schedule the second phone interview as soon as possible. As a result, DOI created their certificates two months after posting their job announcement, whereas HHS created their certificates three and a half months after their job announcement was posted.

Lessons Learned About Scheduling Interviews with Applicants

1. **Requiring HR specialists to join interviews adds more complexity than benefit.** HHS included HR specialists in every interview to act as a third party for legal defensibility, adding 145 extra hours to their participation in the hiring action. In addition to the added complexity of coordinating with a third party's schedule, using a conference line over a direct call led to frequent technical problems. Because SMEs created transcripts of each interview to the best of their ability, HR specialists at DOI reviewed these transcripts after the interviews instead of attending the interviews.
2. **Concurrent interviews save significant time from a hiring action.** Cloud-based collaboration tools were crucial to DOI's manual concurrent interviewing process. DOI's access to cloud spreadsheets allowed HR specialists to update schedulers in real time about which applicants had been found qualified in the

first interview. Schedulers checked this daily to schedule round two interviews, and HR could constantly monitor progress.

3. **Agencies need an automated scheduling tool.** There are several commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) and open-source products that can automate the time-intensive manual task of scheduling appointments between people who cannot see each other's calendar availability. USA Staffing should work to integrate these products directly.

Conducting Passing Score Structured Assessment Interviews

Before phone interviews began, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team partnered with HR specialists at both agencies to conduct a training for SMEs that covered:

- Reviewing the competency-based interview questions and expected responses
- Transcribing applicants' responses to each question to the best of their ability
- Writing a paragraph that analyzed the overall interview
- Translating the applicants' responses into ratings for each question (Does Not Meet, Meets, and Exceeds)

After the interviews, HR specialists reviewed the interview analysis that SMEs provided and calculated the overall interview score based on the ratings from each question.

Despite the training, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team and HHS HR specialists noticed an inadequate level of detail in transcripts and assessments once interviews were underway. The team revised the interview training for both HHS and DOI to provide examples of both good and bad transcripts, which greatly improved transcript quality for remaining interviews at both agencies. The team also improved the design of the interview template, which helped SMEs to better understand the proficiency levels they were assessing for each interview question.

Lessons Learned About Structured Assessment Interviews

1. **A "Borderline" rating for interview assessment questions provided little value and caused confusion.** After the first round of HHS interviews demonstrated that SMEs were unclear about the "Borderline" rating, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team adjusted the rating guide for assessment interviews to remove the "Borderline" option. If the applicant did not demonstrate that they possessed the knowledge of the required competency at the required proficiency level, they could not pass the assessment.
2. **The interview rating system was unnecessarily complex.** The USDS Hiring Pilot Team prescribed interview ratings of 1-5, where only 4 or 5 were passing

scores. By the end of the pilots, the team decided that future actions should instead use an interview rating system of 0-2, where 0 does not meet all requirements, 1 meets all requirements, and 2 exceeds one or more requirements and meets the rest.

3. **Conducting interviews took SMEs longer than expected.** The USDS Hiring Pilot Team originally estimated that each interview would take SMEs one and a half hours, with a full hour allocated for the interview and 30 minutes allocated for completing assessments and submitting the interview template. While the first interview, which measures the breadth of the applicant's knowledge with the competencies, typically took 20 minutes, SMEs reported that they needed more than 30 minutes to both prepare for the interview and complete and submit their interview assessment templates. The team has since revised interview duration estimates to two hours each.
4. **Transcribing interviews required more effort than expected.** While SMEs struggled initially to keep a complete transcript of applicants' responses to interview questions, the USDS Hiring Pilot Team provided more guidance during subsequent interview trainings, and transcript quality improved thereafter. Because transcript fidelity is critical to retrace an SME's decision, they must submit their templates to HR within two days of each interview. Tactics such as shorthand transcripts and screenshots of hand-written notes are sufficient for HR specialist and hiring manager reviews, as well as case file documentation. While the team considered implementing transcription services, it is possible that a lengthy transcript with many errors is less helpful than a shorter transcript for each 60-minute interview.

Issuing Hiring Certificates and Making Selections

When HR specialists finalized the list of qualified applicants based on the SMEs' determinations from interview assessments, HR adjudicated veterans' preference claims for the first time, then applied category rating rules as usual. Hiring managers had the option of reviewing both SME transcripts and resumes to make immediate selections or conducting additional interviews with applicants to determine whether they would be a good fit for the office. Hiring managers at both agencies decided to conduct additional interviews.

Including post-certificate interviews, hiring managers made their first selections within 11 and 16 days of receiving certificates. At DOI, the hiring manager made 11 selections, despite initially anticipating they would fill seven vacancies. At HHS, the hiring manager

made six selections as of publication of this study, with more forthcoming. Both agencies shared their certificates with other offices in their agencies as soon as the original identified vacancies were filled.

Compared with baseline data at both agencies for similar hiring actions, both pilots resulted in fewer applicants found qualified but more selections by the hiring manager. Both agencies plan to replicate the pilot for other positions in the immediate future.

Lessons Learned About Issuing Hiring Certificates and Making Selections

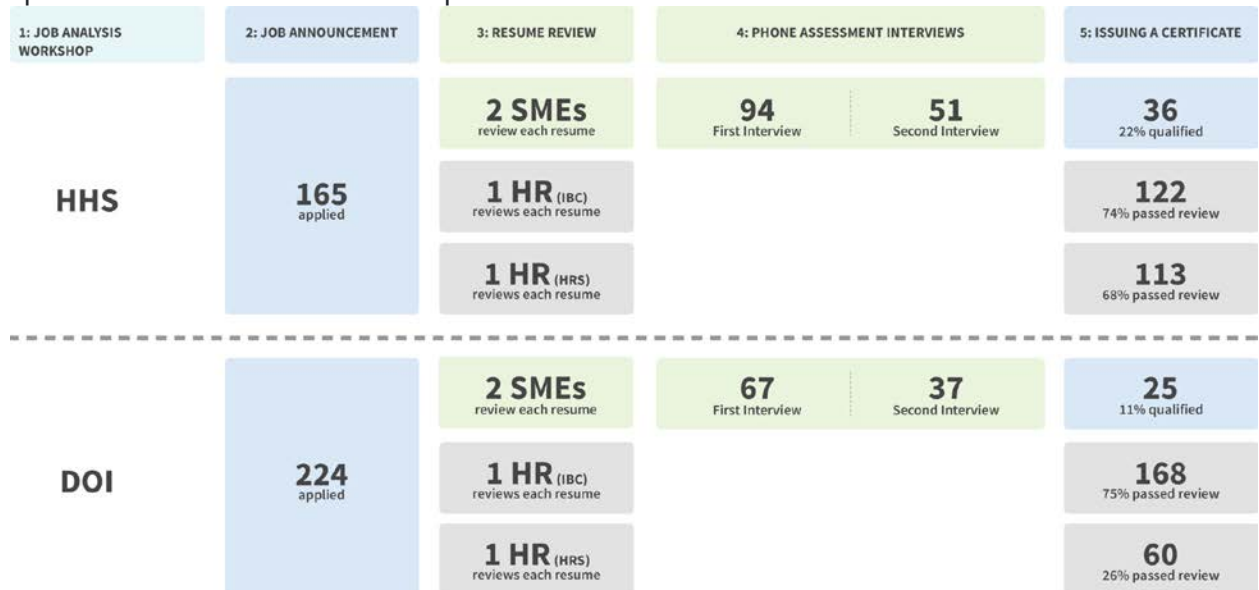
1. **Agencies need a specific governance model for sharing certificates.** HHS employed a governance structure by which all hiring managers from offices who contributed their SMEs' time to the hiring action would be able to review names for 21 days, after which the certificate would be made available to hiring managers in other offices. This guideline meets the needs of offices and applicants alike, and should be a formalized guideline for all agencies.
2. **Veterans' preference complaints are a scapegoat for weak assessment strategies.** SMEs used interviews to assess applicants' qualifications in depth before HR specialists applied preference, resulting in a list of strongly qualified veteran and non-veteran candidates that was presented to hiring managers.
3. **The degree of culture change that the SME-QA process introduces requires a champion who understands the process.** Each agency signed an MOU with OPM that allowed the new assessment strategy. However, after assessments had concluded, one HR specialist wanted to re-evaluate all veterans who had been cut during each phase of the process. OPM reassured the specialist that their previous review of SMEs' documentation justifying each cut was sufficient, and the HR specialist did not complete this separate minimum qualification check. This situation illustrates the degree of culture change the SME-QA process requires for all stakeholders and participants.

Approaching Shortcuts Cautiously

The primary hypothesis driving the SME-QA process is that both qualifications and assessments are most accurate if they're conducted by individuals with expertise in the technical position. The assessment process as currently designed is time-intensive, and agencies will rightfully look for ways to simplify it. Certain parties have suggested particular process efficiencies. However, the team would like to outline the shortcomings of these particular suggestions:

- **SMEs partnering with HR specialists to review resumes with no interviews:** Many agencies indicated that SMEs simply reviewing resumes alongside HR specialists, would greatly improve hiring. The team strongly believes this is not enough, as the assessment process should result in only qualified applicants on the certificate. Interviews assess whether an applicant is truly qualified, not applicant-reported work history in the form of a resume. If pilot agencies had used SMEs for resume review alone, a total of 103 and 78 applicants at each respective agency would have been called qualified. Instead, after two interview assessments, 36 and 26 applicants were ultimately found qualified.
- **Merging two interviews into a single interview:** Two interviews give SMEs and hiring managers a clearer picture of the applicant's abilities than one interview would. If an agency were to combine the interviews into one with two SMEs in attendance, it would require more SME hours. For example, using the current SME-QA process, an agency that conducts 67 first interviews and 38 second interviews would only require 105 SME hours. If two SMEs conducted the same first round interview together, it would require 134 hours.

- Using technical recruiters or HR specialists to review resumes based on SME-developed competencies and proficiencies:** The team spoke with companies like Google who have used technical recruiters to review resumes instead of SMEs, and were curious to learn whether an HR specialist would arrive at the same qualification determinations if they used the SME-developed technical qualifications. To test this, the team contracted with two separate HR specialists from shared staffing services at DOI and OPM to review all 388 pilot resumes using the same competencies and proficiencies that SMEs used. The HR specialist review results not only varied from the SMEs' paper-based qualification determinations, but they also widely varied between the two independent HR specialists who used identical qualifications criteria.



Applying the SME-QA Process to Direct Hire Authority

Many agencies currently employ direct hire authority because of a critical and urgent hiring need. The prescribed SME-QA process can also apply to direct hire authority, with particular changes.

The SME-QA process defines resume review as pass/fail, with applicants who are found minimally qualified divided into categories for Best Qualified, Qualified, and Minimally Qualified. For direct hire, applicants would still receive a pass/fail assessment, but per direct hire rules, would not be divided into categories at the end of the process, nor would veterans' preference be applied.

To streamline the SME-QA process for direct hire, the assessment strategy could define that SMEs conduct a single interview instead of the two defined in the SME-QA process.

Furthermore, while it is not required that the agency or office conduct a job analysis workshop for direct hire, the USDS team strongly recommends doing so as a means of developing a shared understanding among participants and keeping momentum for the hiring action.

Conclusion

The basic premise of using technical professionals to assess the qualifications of applicants before they can be considered qualified is a best practice throughout the private sector. OPM has recently issued [guidance \(https://www.chcoc.gov/content/improving-federal-hiring-through-use-effective-assessment-strategies-advance-mission\)](https://www.chcoc.gov/content/improving-federal-hiring-through-use-effective-assessment-strategies-advance-mission) to inform agencies that they may deploy this type of SME-led assessment strategy whenever appropriate. To improve hiring outcomes, hiring must become part of everyone's job. Although the SME-QA process requires effort and time from SMEs and HR specialists, bringing qualified applicants into an agency is the best way to achieve critical goals to serve the American people.

“ *Outstanding. The fact that we had all of those SMEs in a room and we were brainstorming and just to hear their expertise come out. I wish I could do that on every job when we have to do job analysis. Especially when it comes to technical positions.*

– HR Specialist at HHS